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FIRST PERSON

Harry Potter: A magical prescription for just about anyone

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I hadn't seen Carry for more than two years, but I remembered her, despite having taught 300 or so students since the semester she was in my class. I remember her sitting in the classroom about a third of the way back in the row closest to the door—vibrant, enthusiastic, ready to take on the world. A college sophomore, Carry was planning to become a teacher. Entitled simply "Hi," her recent e-mail to me contained an announcement and a request. Carry explained that she was recovering from a serious illness, and heavy medication had left her with severe chemical depression. She had no illusion that I could prescribe anything to help her physical condition; what she hoped was that I, as her former English teacher, might be able to prescribe some books to help her psychological condition. She asked if I could recommend things she might read that would give her optimism and motivation to heal.

I don't know why I thought first of *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl (1984); it's definitely life affirming, but one has to survive the Holocaust to get that affirmation. I wasn't sure Carry would get past the first encounter with furies. *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom (1974) is gentler and warmer, but it can still seem pretty grim if your chemistry magnifies the cruel-

ty of the universe and you're subconsciously looking for an excuse to remain in bed. Then the answer came; I wrote, "This may seem a little odd, Carry, but I really think you should read Harry Potter."

A little odd, you might think. After all, aren't J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books a children's series? Children all over the world are dressing up in wizards' hats and robes, wearing lightning-shaped stickers on their foreheads, and attending Harry Potter parties at local bookstores. And while the children are off at their parties, their parents are sneaking the Potter books to read for themselves. In response to the popularity of the Harry Potter series among adults, publishers in England, Germany, and Italy are putting out editions with adult-respectable covers so that grown-ups can read them openly on public transportation (Schafer, 2000). People of all ages and situations "read Harry Potter." Many reasons for his popularity have been suggested, and some confirmed.

As I've watched friends—from 8- to 50-year-olds—come under the spell of the young wizard, I have noticed consistently that Potter books have a wonderful capacity to draw us in through the power of imagination. Then,

paradoxically, just as we think we have escaped from the world, they help us find the power to live in it. The places and characters we imagine sustain us as we struggle with places and people who trouble us—including ourselves. That is why I recommended these books to Carry. If one is not ready to handle the Holocaust, I recommend Hogwarts.

A place to escape

Callie, age 10, didn't really want to see the movie of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998). She knew that no movie could come close to what she had imagined, and she was right. When a friend dragged her to the movie, Callie came home and immediately reached for the book—which she had already read five times. “I have to rescue my imagination,” she wailed, as she started on reading number six. Susan Cooper, author of the successful fantasy series *The Dark Is Rising*, understands how Callie felt:

Once the child's imagination is caught up in [a] book, particularly if it deals with experiences beyond his own world, beyond reality—then boundaries vanish, walls disappear, and he finds himself facing a wonderful space in which anything can happen. (1990, p. 305)

Like all good fantasy, *Harry Potter* engages the reader's imagination. Who can resist the excitement of going to school in a mysterious castle where staircases and doorways are always shifting, rooms and corridors are inhabited by ghosts with names like Peeves and Nearly Headless Nick, popular sports are played on flying broomsticks, and professors occasionally turn into cats or wolves? Katya, a middle-aged immigrant who grew up in communist Russia, told me, “I did not have a childhood where I could imagine such things. I will enjoy it now.”

Is it good to get so imaginatively involved with magic—at age 8 or 48? Some parents and fundamentalist religious groups have denounced the *Harry Potter* books, claiming that they will

make children want to become wizards and witches—that author J.K. Rowling must be a witch herself. Rowling has responded that she is not a witch, has no desire to become one, and has never heard of a child wanting to be a witch after reading her books. Children can tell the difference between imagination and reality, Rowling explained (cited in Schafer, 2000). *The Uses of Enchantment*, by psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, is a classic in the area of children's responses to fantasy. Bettelheim affirmed that a child understands instinctively that fantasies “speak to him in the language of symbols and not that of everyday reality” (1976, p. 62). He explained that “although these stories are *unreal*, they are not *untrue*,” that they “depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence” (p. 73).

Do corridors and staircases really shift around, moving from day to day—even hour to hour? Ten-year-old Callie knows that the staircase in her home is always in the same place, but there are many things in her life that do move around. She has lived in different houses with different configurations of family, attended different schools, experienced different friendships, traveled to different countries, and experienced the effects of life-threatening illness in her immediate family. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998), the shifting architecture of Hogwarts is another unforeseen change. But after a short while the Hogwarts students get used to the changes in their surroundings, and they learn to manage just fine. Callie has learned she can handle changes in her life as well. Shifting staircases are *unreal* but change and resiliency are *true*.

Katya, the Russian immigrant, has seen vast political, military, economic, and religious changes occur in her native country, and she has adapted to even greater changes in coming to the United States. She understands what it means to be overwhelmed with “strangeness,” just as Harry is at first overwhelmed by walking through a wall

to catch his train to Hogwarts; by having his living conditions and social life determined by a talking hat; by having his mail delivered by owls; and, above all, by finding himself famous, rich, athletic, and controversial. During her frequent visits to England, Katya does not expect to see owls delivering mail or to be told that her train leaves Kings Cross Station on Platform 9¾. Owl mail and Platform 9¾ are *unreal*, but the fact that people can adjust and thrive despite strangeness is *true*. In her books, Rowling is not teaching people how to put spells on corridors and staircases; she's teaching them that they can deal with unpredictability and change.

Carry, my student with depression, is facing changes in her life—physical, social, and, above all, emotional. She can't handle thinking about concentration camps right now, and she's not ready to dwell on changes in Afghanistan. She needs to begin with changes she can see in her imagination. The shifting corridors and miraculous dining rooms of Hogwarts are good places to begin the healing process.

A self to confront

Once we find our way in imaginary corridors, we're ready to encounter people who seem *unreal* but, on deeper reflection, are marvelously *true*. Like Carry, most of us have times in our lives when we can or can't handle the brutality of Nazi guards or the suffering of prisoners in flea-infested dormitories (see Ten Boom, 1974). But we can generally handle robust, energetic children who are optimistic and well-intentioned, even if they do occasionally break rules, quarrel with their friends, manipulate their teachers, and hide behind an invisibility cloak in order to complete their schemes. These children initially become our friends but ultimately become our teachers. I've benefited from knowing them, and I suspect that Carry will too.

I became acquainted with Harry Potter while jogging. My daughter had checked tapes of the Harry Potter books out of the library. Because

jogging is something I do but do not enjoy, I wanted a little imaginative reassurance that I could survive some frustration. The school setting of the story appealed to me. As a somewhat overworked professor, I needed to escape temporarily to a school where I didn't have quite so many class preparations, piles of student research papers, committee meetings, technology workshops, and other demands. Professor McGonagall quickly became my hero. Students don't wiggle and giggle in the back rows of her classes, and she can turn into a cat when it suits her purpose. In allegiance to Professor McGonagall, I decided to buy a tartan dressing gown.

But I found more than one sympathetic character in the Harry Potter series. When Hermione cries for hours in the girls' bathroom because she knows all the "answers" but doesn't know how to make friends, I know just how she feels. As I child, I cried in a few bathrooms; I still do. Also like Hermione, I hide behind textbook answers and professor vocabulary when I don't know the real answers. Hermione is insecure, and she is continually taking on extra study and extra projects to prove herself. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling, 1999) Hermione magically manipulates time so that she can take more than one class during the same hour; in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Rowling, 2000) she undertakes a full-fledged campaign to free the oppressed house elves—who can't understand why she is doing it. I've worked all night in order to double the productivity of some days, and I've become as tired and grumpy as Hermione. My students may not be elves, but they know what it's like to have more knowledge and opportunities thrust upon them than they really are ready—or desire—to try to handle. I find bright aspects of myself in Hermione—idealism, energy, creativity. I want to help people; I want to do something useful with my life. I also see darker aspects of my character in Hermione. I push myself and others too hard; I'm defensive of my ideas, and I want things done my way. I search too eagerly for validation. If someone compared me to a Nazi guard or even to an obsessive inmate

(see Ten Boom, 1974), I would be immediately defensive, and the well-meaning critic wouldn't get far. But a child witch in a fantasy series—I can handle that. Maybe I'll trade in Professor McGonagall's tartan dressing gown for a box of Hermione's chocolate frogs.

Katya, my Russian friend, found herself in the character of Harry Potter. As a musical child prodigy, she, like Harry, was different from others. She had that indefinable something called "talent"—which brought her fame and opportunities but bound her with responsibilities she did not understand. Today, as a concert performer and successful teacher, she still faces uncertainties regarding herself, her potentials, and her destiny. She faces the resentment of associates who, like Harry's nemesis Draco Malfoy, lack her gifts and opportunities and resent her for them. In Harry, Katya sees a bright face of dedication and success; she sees someone with talent and self-efficacy who is learning how to maximize what he can do. She also sees a darker side—ambition, competitiveness, and, though it is rare, a taste for revenge.

I know a Ron too—the good natured, supportive, red-haired friend who is always there when you need him. Do all supportive friends have red hair?

Katya and I are not the only adults who see ourselves in the world's most famous children. Winifred Radigan, a public school administrator, sees herself in Harry, and she wrote this about it:

It is no wonder that Harry appeals across genders, ages, races, and ethnicities. We all have felt left out and misunderstood. We all have had our fears and embarrassments made public. We all have been misunderstood and mocked. We all have had to find the desperate courage to go on. And we all have felt the wonder of things going just right. (2001, p. 694)

Is it good for children, adolescents, and adults all over the world to identify with fledgling witches and wizards who are just beginning to discover the magic within themselves? Bettelheim (1976) suggested that this process of identifica-

tion is very important for a child's moral development.

Because of this identification the child imagines that he suffers with the hero his trials and tribulations, and triumphs with him as virtue is victorious. The child makes such identifications all on his own, and the inner and outer struggles of the hero imprint morality on him. (p. 9)

Bettelheim clarified by explaining that children see the advantages of moral behavior through the tangible details of the story, which are much more meaningful than the "abstract ethical concepts" (p. 5) that might be lectured at them. Bettelheim carried the process further by explaining that a child uses the images of fantasies to "structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life" (p. 7). He explained that manipulating these images is the way in which a child experiments with perceptions and ideas. T.A. Barron (2001), author of the fantasy series *The Lost Years of Merlin*, extended the process to "children" of all ages:

The best fantasy can give us a whole new perspective on ourselves.... [W]e discover things about ourselves, be they disturbing or encouraging or altogether absurd. And we believe.... In compelling tales of fantasy, we believe the emotional elements as fully as if they had happened during our own lives. (p. 54)

Susan Cooper called this kind of identification "amazing adventures with no price tag" (1990, p. 309). In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1998), Hermione's crying in the bathroom goes on for too long, and she finds her privacy invaded (and her life threatened) by a giant cave troll. The ensuing battle is her "price tag." Hermione teaches us that whoever wallows too long in their own misery may have to fight a troll. I can't tell my student Carry that she's just got to fight her way through the depression so that it won't consume her. I suspect many have told her this already, and she doesn't need—or want—it from me. But Hermione can show her the monster.

Courage

I recently received a card from Carry. She's coming back to school. Returning to the campus of a large university after a bout with illness and depression isn't quite the same as returning to Hogwarts after a summer with disgusting relatives, but there are similarities. Schools can be simultaneously places of refuge and places of danger. Perhaps imaginatively exploring the shifting corridors of Hogwarts will have in some ways prepared Carry for the stable corridors but shifting climates and relationships of her school. Perhaps watching as Harry confronts dementors and Boggarts, gasping as Ron faces a giant spider, and cheering as Hermione outwits the witch-paparazzi (Rowling, 1999, 2000) will give Carry the courage to face her own fears, aversions, and personal threats. I hope so.

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